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Donald Walker Jr.  
*Cleveland State University*

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THE EFFECT OF CONTACT TYPE ON PERCEPTIONS OF SEX  
OFFENDER RECIDIVISM RISK

DONALD WALKER JR

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology

The Ohio State University

May 2015

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN PSYCHOLOGY

at the

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December 2017

We hereby approve this thesis for

\_\_\_\_\_  
Donald Walker

Candidate for the Master degree for the

Department of Psychology

and the CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Graduate Studies by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Chairperson, Ilya Yaroslavsky, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Member, Christopher France, Psy.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Member, Eric Allard, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Department &

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THE EFFECT OF CONTACT TYPE ON PERCEPTIONS OF SEX OFFENDER  
RECIDIVISM RISK

DONALD WALKER JR

ABSTRACT

Prior research has found that the general public perceives sex offenders negatively as a whole (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). These perceptions have enabled sex offender management policies that create ironic conditions for sex offender rehabilitation and reintegration (Hanson, & Harris, 2000). More recent research has found that when sex offenders are presented as subcategories the public has more varied, though still negative attitudes toward sex offenders (King & Roberts, 2015). Furthermore, a burgeoning area of research has developed around the differentiation of child sex offenders based on the contact that they have had with their victims: non-contact, contact-only, and mixed-contact. The present study examined the effect that contact type has on perceptions of recidivism for child sex offenders, and whether the presentation of statistical information would affect these perceptions. There was a significant differentiation of perceptions of recidivism across contact types. Participant sex had a significant effect such that women perceived sex offenders as more likely to recidivate than male participants. Moreover, presenting statistical information to participants significantly reduced their perceptions of recidivism; although these perceptions remained significantly higher than the empirical data for recidivism. These results have significant implications for outreach programs that may seek to better educate the public about sex offenders and the development of sex offender management policies with a more empirically-based approach.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Sex offenders engage in nonconsensual sexual activities that may cause bodily harm to their victims. These nonconsensual sexual acts can lead to numerous emotional and mental disruptions in the lives of survivors and their loved ones. Even when below diagnostic levels, the emotional disruption that is brought about by nonconsensual sexual activities (sexual abuse) can disturb the survivor's ability to live normal and productive lives, or interact with others in a healthy way. Sexual abuse is especially problematic when it occurs in childhood, as its occurrence may disrupt key developmental periods among young persons whose coping repertoires are still developing. Not surprisingly, offenders who commit nonconsensual sexual activities with minors (child sex offenders) are perceived more negatively and threatening than offenders who commit other types of sexual offenses (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006).

The United States government has attempted to mitigate the societal threat posed by sex offenders through the development of management policies (SMART, *Legislative History*). These policies on the surface reduce the risk for recidivism by informing the general public of sex offender identities and whereabouts, as well as by limiting potential places of residence. Despite their good intentions, sex offender management policies

have inadvertently increased the risk for recidivism by creating barriers for successful rehabilitation and societal re-integration of those who have committed sexual offenses with minors (Levenson & Cotter, 2005a). These barriers are a product of society perceiving sex offenders wholly threatening (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). Consistent with this view, the public supports policies that are highly punitive to sex offenders as a whole.

Given evidence that public opinion informs public policy (Page & Shapiro, 1983), the present study aims to examine whether the nature of sexual offense (i.e., acts that involve contact with a victim, non-contact acts that are usually computer-based, and mixed-contact acts) influences perceptions of risk for recidivism among community dwelling adults. Further, it seeks to test whether providing participants with information of objective risk for recidivism alters their perceptions of recidivism risk. By clarifying whether the nature of sexual offense influences how the general public perceives risk for recidivism, this line of work has potential to identify key targets for public education efforts, with the goal of tailoring policy to better align with actual risk for recidivism. The potential upshot of such re-alignment is the removal of unnecessary obstacles for reintegrating low-risk sex offenders into a society that illogically exacerbates the risk for this group to reoffend.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *2.1 Review of Sex Offenders*

Sex offenders are individuals who have committed sexually based crimes that involve coercing or forcing an individual to engage in sexual activities with or for the offender. Later, this definition was expanded to include individuals who have been involved in the creation, possession, or distribution of lewd sexual media and materials of minors. Sex offenders can be separated based on the type of contact they have had with their victims. First, there are contact-only sex offenders. These are perpetrators that physically abuse their victims, and they primarily have offline access to their victims. Second, there are non-contact sex offenders. These perpetrators never physically abuse their victims, instead they fulfill their sexual urges by communicating with children through various forms of technology. These types of offenders include child pornography consumers and solicitors who engage solely in cybersex. Lastly, there are mixed-contact offenders. These perpetrators use some form of technology to gain access to victims and groom them for a physical interaction. These offenders have transitioned from solely non-contact offenses, and commit both contact and non-contact offenses, for example child pornography creators.

These three groups of sex offenders exhibit distinct phenomenological patterns and risk factor profiles. For instance, there seems to be a clear distinction between contact-only offenders and mixed-contact or non-contact offenders such that contact-only offenders do not utilize technology as a primary part of their offending process. Additionally, there is some evidence in the literature that contact-only offenders are more likely than non-contact offenders to have a history of drug abuse, multiple convictions for sex crimes, and deviant sexual interest in minors (McCarthy, 2010). In a similar vein, online (non-contact) offenders differ from the other two groups in several important ways. For instance, Seto, Hanson, and Babchishin (2011) reported that only one in eight online offenders had a criminal record for contact offending. Others have also noted that non-contact offenders are higher functioning, as evidenced by them more likely to have completed higher education and to have a job than their contact-only peers (Jung et al., 2012). Non-contact offenders also evidenced higher levels of sexual inhibition that prevented them from becoming mixed-contact offenders.

In contrast, mixed-contact offenders are more likely to have previous criminal convictions and lower educational attainment than non-contact offenders. This group also possesses fewer illicit images of children than their non-contact peers which may suggest that these individuals instrumentally use technology to identify and groom potential victims (Long, Alison, & McManus, 2012).

A common theme in the literature relates to the risk for crossover of non-contact and contact-only offenders to mixed-contact offenders. Crossover risk in this instance is the likelihood that a non-contact offender will commit a contact offense, or a previously contact-only offender will employ technology for a future offense. The extant literature

identifies several risk factors for such crossover that include motivation and access barriers.

With respect to the first crossover risk domain, offenders may demonstrate fantasy- and contact-driven motivations (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011; Merdian, Curtis, Thakker, Wilson & Boer, 2013). A contact-driven offender uses technology as a tool for future physical contact or as part of contact offenses, such as victim grooming. Therefore, contact-driven motivation increases the risk for committing a future sexual offense, and thus becoming a mixed-contact offender. In contrast, a fantasy-driven offender uses technology as an outlet for their sexual interest in children with little desire to commit a contact offense.

With respect to the second crossover risk domain, access and barriers to sex offending differentiated online offenders from contact-only offenders (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2013). Online-only offenders (non-contact) were more likely to have deviant sexual interests, but also more barriers than offline-only (non-contact) offenders. These barriers included less access to children, more victim empathy, and greater social engagement with family and friends. Conversely, those who went on to commit contact offenses evidenced greater sexual interest in minors than those who remained in the non-contact category. Similarly, non-contact offenders evidenced greater victim empathy and inhibitory control, as well as fewer antisocial personality traits and cognitive distortions with respect to the nature of their offense (Houtepen, Sijtsema, & Bogaerts, 2014).

In summary, there appear to be three clusters of sex offenders who evidence distinct patterns of risk factors and offending profiles: contact, non-contact, and mixed-

contact offenders. These groups differ not only with respect to their preferred type of interaction with victims, but also in terms of legal and sexually deviance, barriers to their offending, and motives for their offenses.

## *2.2 Sex Offender Management Policies*

Despite unique offending patterns across sex offenders, those who commit a sexual offense are perceived highly negatively despite empirical data indicating that there is hope that re-offense may be greatly reduced. The consequence of perceiving all sex offenders as largely negative is the development of policies that apply a strict, monolithic approach to offender management with minimal influence from empirical data. The negative outcome of such an approach is the increased hardships and barriers to rehabilitation and re-integration of low-risk offenders into society, with these hardships paradoxically bringing about conditions that can increase the risk for recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 2000).

Sex offender management policies include the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act of 1994 (otherwise known as the Wetterling Act), Megan's Law, Lychner Sex Offender Tracking and Identification Act of 1996, Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, and its Title I: The Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act. The Wetterling Act was the first national law that established how states should track sex offenders. It required that sex offenders update their residence with the state on a regular basis. This was followed with an additional subsection in 1996 known as Megan's Law, which allowed for public disclosure of a state's sex offender registry. In close succession, the Pam Lychner Sex

Offender Tracking and Identification Act of 1996 led to the development of the National Sex Offender Registry, which enables the dissemination of information on sex offenders across state lines by the public. Finally, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, and its Title I: The Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act created a three tier system for determining the length of time a sex offender must remain registered based on the type of offenses they committed, and expanded the scope of offenses that could be consider sex crimes to included internet offenders, among other additions.

Despite the two decades since the first act was implemented, researchers have only recently begun to study the efficacy of sex offender policies and their secondary consequences. The results have been mixed. For example, Agan (2011) noted that sex offender registries did not prevent re-offense, but were useful for law enforcement officers to catch repeat offenders. Others have also noted that current sex offender policies, such as Megan's Law, have had many unintended social consequences for sex offenders. Sex offender residence restrictions increased social isolation and financial hardships for offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005a). Additionally, some of the offenders, in that study, stated that the restrictions prevented them from living with supportive family members, who could aid them in rehabilitation. Furthermore, they found that offenders felt that the residence restriction was ineffective in that some offenders may still live in communities with a high population of children and that the registration requirements would not prevent a highly motivated sex offender from reoffending.

In addition to the limited efficacy of some sex offender policies, some researchers have identified inherent flaws in the underlining assumptions that guide them. For example, Socia and Stamatel (2010) found a few main inconsistencies between the

assumptions and evidence behind sex offender laws. First, they found that sex offender laws assume that offenders are strangers, but most reported sex offenders are known to their victims. Second, sex offender laws assume that offenders reside in areas with lots of children, but they do not live in these communities and commonly go far away from where they live to be in areas with lots of children (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b). Social and Stamatel (2010) suggested that sex offender laws are meant to appease a frightful public. Likewise, Terry (2015) suggested that sex offender policies are emotionally charged and are based on the flawed assumption that all sex offenders are prone to reoffend.

Most policies are not reflective of the current literature about offenders, and may make rehabilitation and reintegration more difficult for low risk offenders by diminishing their ability to find housing or employment. Koon-Magnin (2015) found that despite the lack of evidence that sex offender registries are effective, there was overwhelming public support for the policies. Schiavone and Jeglic (2009) found that many respondents supported sex offender registration laws although they felt that those laws were ineffective, and they were sympathetic toward the adverse outcomes for offenders. While the presence of sex offender management policies appears to reduce society's anxiety about sex offenders' risk for recidivism, these policies may inadvertently increase such risk by creating obstacles for rehabilitating and integrating sex offenders into mainstream society. Therefore, it is imperative that the public and policy makers take into account current research on sex offenders.

### *2.3 Public Perceptions of Sex Offenders*

Public perception of sex offenders is marked by notable stereotypes that homogenize the distinct subgroups of sex offenders. For example, sex offenders are commonly typed as white males, in their early thirties, who engage in a contact offense (Greenfeld, 1997; Ackerman, Harris, Levenson, & Zgoba, 2011). This perception of homogeneity is inaccurate in terms of offense because the “sex offender” title covers a wide range of offenses. As previously mentioned, sex offenders can be distinguished into at least three distinct categories, but there are even more types of offenders. There are sexually non-violent offenders like exhibitionists and voyeurs who never physically harm their victims. There are offenders who only offend against adults. There are juveniles who commit sexual offenses. Also, there are cases of young adults and teenagers who are charged as sex offenders due to engaging in consensual intercourse while underage. In the previously mentioned distinctions of contact type, offenders can also be distinguished based on the presences of antisocial personality traits or by their academic and career achievement.

Another misperception is that offenders have equal rates of recidivism. In general, the rates of sexual recidivism tend to be low and declines over time following release (Hanson & Bussière's, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Hanson et al., 2014). Recent findings have shown that contact-only offenders had a recidivism rate of roughly 6 percent and non-contact offenders had a recidivism rate of roughly 5 percent (Faust, Bickart, Renaud, and Camp, 2015; Jung et al., 2012; Seto, Hanson, and Babchishin, 2011). Another recent study has shown that mixed-contact offenders have a recidivism rate of roughly 6% (Goller, Jones, Dittmann, Taylor, & Graf, 2016). Despite this

minimization in recidivism, public opinion views offenders as largely dangerous. Society believes that recidivism is inevitable for those who commit a sexual offense, particularly when the victim was a child (Lave, 2011). Another study found that sex offenders are perceived as mentally ill, substance users who engage in frequent untoward sexual activity, and that the public believes that offenders should spend about 45 years in prison (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007).

#### *2.4 Individual Differences in Perceptions of Sex Offenders*

While the public's perceptions of sex offenders are overwhelmingly negative (Edwards & Hensley, 2001), recent literature shows that respondents' gender, education levels, and prior exposure to sex offenders influence the degree to which such opinions are negative (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Harper, 2012; Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Jung, Jamieson, Buro, & Decesare, 2011; Willis, Malinen, & Johnston, 2013). For example, in a survey conducted by Ferguson and Ireland (2006) men were shown to view child sex offender more negatively than females. However, others have noted opposite trends, with women holding more negative views towards sex offenders than males (Willis et al., 2013). Similar mixed findings from that study are related to education levels, with some respondents observing fewer stereotypes about sex offenders and less negative attitudes toward sex offenders as a function of higher education. Another study noted more negative opinions among college Psychology students as compared to those of other disciplines (Harper, 2012). The type and nature of interaction with sex offenders also influences public opinion. For example, some have found that individuals who worked with sex offenders or were survivors of sexual abuse viewed offenders less negatively



than the general population (Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Ferguson & Ireland, 2006).

Conversely, others have failed to show such distinctions between individuals who worked with sex offenders and the general population (Jung, Jamieson, Buro, & Decesare, 2011).

There is also reason to believe that nature of sexual offense would impact the public's perception of recidivism risk. For instance, previous research findings suggest that non-contact offenders have greater barriers to offending such as a lack of access to minors, greater sexual inhibition, more stable life circumstances, and more victim empathy than contact-only or mixed-contact offenders (McCarthy, 2010; Jung et al., 2012; Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2013; Houtepen, Sijtsema, and Bogaerts, 2014). By comparison mixed-contact offenders have fewer barriers to offending such as more access to minors, greater deviant sexual interest, less life stability, and less victim empathy than contact-only or non-contact offenders (Long, Alison, & McManus, 2012). Additionally, mixed-contact offending incorporates the offending pattern of both non-contact and contact-only offenders. Thus it is likely that they will receive the most negative perception.

## *2.5 Current Study*

The present study has two aims: (1) examine the relationships between offense type and perceived recidivism risk, and (2) test whether providing information on recidivism risk for contact-only, non-contact, and mixed-contact offenders alters perceptions of recidivism risk among a sample of community dwelling adults. Recent findings suggest that information on victims, offenders, and the nature of the offense modifies respondents' perception, such that as the offense worsened so did the public's

attitudes (King & Roberts, 2015). This finding has implications on the relationship between public education and public policy. By clarifying whether the nature of sexual offense and recidivism rates influence perceptions of recidivism risk, this project has the potential to identify key targets for public education efforts, with the goal of better tailoring policy to align with empirically supported recidivism risk. The potential upshot of such realignment is the removal of unnecessary obstacles for reintegrating low-risk sex offenders into a society that paradoxically exacerbates the risk for this group to reoffend. While previous studies have examined the perceptions and attitudes towards sex offenders broadly, this current study examines perceptions of recidivism for child sex offenders, specifically, and analyzes them via the contact that they have with their victims. An examination of perceived likelihood to reoffend is important for identifying how the public views the risk posed by these types of offenders, which could then be used to develop more efficient outreach strategies.

Hypothesis 1: Offense type (contact-only, non-contact, mixed-contact) will influence participants' perceptions of offenders' recidivism risk, such that non-contact offenders are perceived least negatively and mixed-contact offenders are perceived most negatively.

Hypothesis 2: Sex, age, education, and prior exposure to sex offenders will affect the relationship described in Hypothesis 1, although the directionality of these effects is unknown given the mixed findings in the literature.

Hypothesis 3: Providing factual information on recidivism risk for each sex offender group will reduce the discrepancy between participants' perceived recidivism risk and those published in the literature.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### *3.1 Participants*

There were three-hundred and eighty-three participants who completed the survey, however only two-hundred seventy adults successfully responded to all attentional items (see Appendix VI). Of the two-hundred seventy adults, 52% responded that they identified as female and 48% responded that they identified as male. They were between the ages of 18 and 80 years ( $M = 36.94$ ,  $SD = 12.16$ ) who were recruited via an online participant survey study management system, Amazon Mechanical Turk. The majority of participants self-identified as White or Caucasian (Non-Hispanic) (78%), while the remaining were Asian or Pacific Islander (8%) Black or African-American (7.0%), Latina/Latino (4%), Native American Indian (1%) or Multiracial or “other” (2%). The majority of participants attained either a college (50%), high school education (32%) or post-graduate (17%) education, with a minority failing to complete high school or a GED (2%). With respect to previous experience with sex offenses or offenders, 33% reported either directly experiencing or knowing someone who experienced child sexual abuse, and 28% reported knowing someone who was convicted for a sexual offense.

### *3.2 Procedure*

This study was approved by the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Participants were exclusively recruited from residents of the United States of America and were required to be at least 18 years of age. Those who took part in the study completed an online consent form, and an anonymous survey for which they were compensated \$.50. The survey had three segments that involved participants: (1) reading three vignettes that portrayed one of the three sex offender contact types and responding to questions that measure the perceptions of recidivism risk for the character described in each vignette (pretest), (2) a random presentation of recidivism rates for one of the three vignette characteristics and a second administration of the vignette questionnaire (posttest) based on that vignette's contact type, and (3) a demographic questionnaire.

### *3.3 Measures*

**Vignette.** One of three vignettes was presented that portrayed a non-contact, contact-only, or mixed-contact offense. The follow-up survey consisted of the participant's perception of the fictitious sex offender. This survey examined the perceived likelihood to reoffend, response to treatment, and measures the degree of comfort respondents would feel to be around the offender. The character in each vignette reflected a low risk (recidivism) offender based on the items in the STATIC-99, an actuarial tool to measure the risk of recidivism for sex offenders (Hanson & Thornton, 2000). These vignettes illustrated STATIC-99 items for age, number of prior offenses, familial relation to the victim, and whether or not the offender is known to the victim. Perpetrators who are aged

40+, have no prior offenses (sexual or otherwise), are unrelated to the victim, and are known to the victim for at least 24 hours prior to the offense are considered a lower risk for recidivism. The researchers decided to use a character based on low risk offenders as an objective means to minimize the effects of extraneous characteristics that might influence risk perceptions.

**Demographics.** These items pertain to the participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and current level of education. Additionally, participants were asked about victim status or knowledge of other victims. Lastly, they were asked about the source of their knowledge on sex offenders and the sex offender laws like registration.

### *3.4 Analysis*

Hypothesis 1 was tested via a repeated measures ANOVA in which risk for recidivism was the dependent variable and offense type presented in the vignette (non-contact, contact-only, or mixed-contact) was a within-subjects factor. A significant omnibus F-test was followed by post-hoc contrasts that corrected the nominal alpha level of .05 for multiple comparisons using the *Bonferroni* correction (new nominal alpha = .017).

Hypothesis 2 was tested via a one-way ANCOVA in which risk for recidivism was the dependent variable and offense type presented in the vignette (non-contact, contact-only, or mixed-contact) was the within-subjects factor, and sex, age, education, and prior contact with sex offenders were the covariates. A significant omnibus F-test

was followed by post-hoc contrasts that corrected the nominal alpha level of .05 for multiple comparisons (new nominal alpha = .017).

Hypothesis 3 was tested via a repeated measures ANCOVA in which recidivism risk ratings (pretest vs. posttest) served as the within-subject factor, offense type presented in the vignette (non-contact, contact-only, or mixed-contact) was the between-subjects factor, and sex, age, education, and prior contact with sex offenders were the covariates.

G-Power was used to estimate the required sample size for this study. For the purpose of this study, small-to-moderate effect sizes ( $f = .18-.21$ ) were used to estimate the required sample size at 80% power and alpha .05. This effect size was chosen as a compromise between power and sample size, given in the absence of published findings that approximate the design proposed in this study. A sample size of  $N = 270$  is ( $N = 90$  per group) is sufficient to detect small-to-medium effects for Hypothesis 1 ( $f = .18$ ), Hypothesis 2 ( $f = .21$ ), and Hypothesis 3 ( $f = .18$ ).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### *4.1 Hypothesis 1*

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine whether offense type (non-contact, contact, mixed-contact) influenced perceptions of recidivism risk. The within-subjects omnibus test was adjusted using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction to accommodate departures from sphericity, Mauchly's  $W = .63$ ,  $\chi^2 = 124.57$ ,  $p < .001$ . Results showed a significant within-subjects effect for offense type,  $F(1, 46) = 156.65$ ,  $p < .05$ . Follow-up contrasts revealed that mixed-contact offenders ( $M = 75.20$ ,  $SD = 23.33$ ) were perceived as significantly more likely to reoffend than contact-only offenders ( $M = 68.51$ ,  $SD = 24.57$ ),  $F(1, 269) = 85.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , and non-contact offenders ( $M = 56.17$ ,  $SD = 26.02$ ),  $F(1, 269) = 204.00$ ,  $p < .001$ . In a similar vein, contact-only offenders were perceived as significantly more likely reoffend than non-contact offenders,  $F(1, 269) = 119.99$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### *4.2 Hypothesis 2*

It was predicted that sex, age, education, and prior exposure to sex offenders would influence the effect of offense type on perceptions of recidivism risk. This was in



part an exploratory analysis due to previous mixed results about the directionality of the effect of sex on perceptions of sex offenders. It was expected that higher educational attainment and previous exposure to offenders would be related to less negative perceptions of recidivism risk.

Results of a repeated measures ANCOVA that employed the Greenhouse-Geisser correction revealed a significant between-subjects effect of sex,  $F(1,261) = 35.02, p < .001$ , and a continued significant within-subject effect of offense type. An examination of the sex effect revealed that women perceived greater risk for recidivism than men across offense types (female  $M_{non-contact} = 64.26, M_{contact-only} = 75.58, M_{mixed-contact} = 81.19$ ; male  $M_{non-contact} = 47.16, M_{contact-only} = 60.62, M_{mixed-contact} = 68.53$ ). Post-hoc comparisons showed that mixed-contact ( $M = 70.20$ ) and contact-only offenders ( $M = 64.77$ ) continued to be perceived at a greater risk for recidivism than contact-only offenders ( $M = 53.11$ ) independent of model covariates,  $F(1, 261) = 7.49-9.15, ps = .003 - .007$ . Independent of other effects, differences in perceived risk for mixed-contact and contact-only offenders fell below a level of significance,  $F(1, 261) = 1.66, p = .20$ .

#### *4.3 Hypothesis 3*

It was predicted that providing empirical data with recidivism rates for each sex offender group would reduce the discrepancy between participants' perceived recidivism risk and those published in the literature. A series of dependent samples t-tests were computed to examine whether this intervention had an effect on perceived recidivism risk. Consistent with expectation, information of recidivism rates significantly reduced perceptions of risk for all offense types,  $\Delta M_{non-contact} = 23.43, t(86) = 7.48, p < .001$ ,

$\Delta M_{\text{contact-only}} = 30.55$ ,  $t(88) = 9.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\Delta M_{\text{mixed-contact}} = 35.43$ ,  $t(93) = 11.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . Importantly, participants' perceived recidivism risk at the posttest never reached the presented empirical rates of recidivism ( $\sim 6\%$ ), ( $M_{\text{non-contact}} = 35.24$ ,  $M_{\text{contact-only}} = 38.89$ ,  $M_{\text{mixed-contact}} = 37.06$ ),  $t(86-93) = 8.59-9.14$ ,  $ps < .001$ .

To explore whether risk reduction was more pronounced for a particular offense type, a univariate ANCOVA was conducted on change scores across pretests and posttests of each offense, and controlled for the effects of demographic variables as well as abuse/sex offender exposure. Omnibus test results revealed significant effects for sex,  $F(1, 268) = 5.42$ ,  $p = .02$ , exposure to sex offenders,  $F(1, 268) = 4.32$ ,  $p = .04$ , and offense type,  $F(1, 268) = 3.54$ ,  $p = .03$ . Women ( $M = 32.02$ ) showed greater change in risk ratings across groups than did men ( $M = 23.26$ ), as did those who did not know someone who was convicted for a sexual offense ( $M = 32.69$ ) compared to those who did ( $M = 22.68$ ). Post hoc contrasts of offense group revealed that those in the mixed-contact group ( $M = 34.62$ ) evidenced greater reduction in perceived risk as compared to those in the non-contact group ( $M = 23.27$ ),  $p = .03$ . A univariate ANCOVA was conducted to examine whether the three offender groups differed in their posttest risk perception, independent of the effects of demographic variables as well as abuse/sex offender exposure. Participants endorsed similar perceptions of risks across the three offender types, non-contact ( $M = 35.58$ ), contact-only ( $M = 39.34$ ) and mixed-contact offenders ( $M = 35.87$ ),  $F(2, 260) = .34$ ,  $p = .71$ .

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Early research on perceptions of sex offenders demonstrated that the public views sex offenders wholly negative (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). This public perception has shaped policy for the reintegration of sex offenders into the community after their adjudication. However, while sex offenders are a complex group, the current monolithic approach to offender management has been linked to increased hardships and barriers to rehabilitation and re-integration of low-risk offenders into society that paradoxically bring about conditions that can increase the risk for recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 2000). Results from recent studies suggest that public attitudes and perceptions of sex offenders are malleable, and that individuals view sex offenders less negatively when they are presented with subcategories of offenders (King & Roberts, 2015). Given that public perception is key for changing policy on sex offender management, the present study aimed to test whether contact type (non-contact, contact-only, or mixed-contact) would influence the public's perception of sex offenders in terms of recidivism risk. The secondary aim of this study was to examine whether providing factual information about recidivism risk for these subcategories of sex offenders would reduce the public's recidivism ratings.

As hypothesized, offense type was significantly associated with perception of recidivism risk, whereby non-contact offenders who had not physically harmed their victims were perceived as the least likely to reoffend, while mixed-contact offenders, or offenders who had both physically harmed their victims and indirectly participated in child sexual abuse, were perceived as the most likely to reoffend. Contact-only offenders were in the middle of non-contact and mixed-contact with respect to risk perceptions. These findings are consistent with a previous study that indicated that perceptions of sex offenders are based on their perceived threat (King & Roberts, 2015). Mixed-contact offenders may have been viewed as more dangerous than the other offender types, as they employ the internet instrumentally to groom and then assault their victims. The perception of danger as a function of offense type was not measured in this study, and may provide an important next step in future research when considering public perception of sex offenders.

In partial support of the second hypothesis that sex, age, education, prior knowledge of an offender, and prior victim status would have an effect on the perception of recidivism across contact-type, the results showed that that female participants were more likely to view sex offenders as riskier than did men. This is consistent with a previous study that indicated that female participants viewed sex offenders more negatively than male participants (Willis et al., 2013). It is possible that female participants view themselves at a greater risk for experiencing sexual violence, which would account for their negative view of sex offenders. This possibility is supported by the fact that women account for 86% of all sexual assault victims and 82% of all juvenile sexual assault victims (Department of Justice, 2000). Furthermore, there were more

female participants who reported experiencing or knowing someone who had experienced sexual victimization (N=56) than males who had reported (N=33). These women accounted for 20% of participants in total, and 40% of female participants. While sexual victimization did not influence recidivism risk ratings by itself, it is possible that it enables an overall heightened sense of risk. Null findings on the effects of age, education, and prior exposure to sexual victimization/sexual offenders on recidivism risk adds to a mixed literature on the topic (Harper, 2012; Jung, Jamieson, Buro, & Decesare, 2011). This study focused on main effects of the above noted individual differences on risk perceptions, and did not examine whether these individual differences modify the effect of offense type on risk perception. Therefore, more complex associations between individual differences and risk perceptions may be present, and should be tested in future works.

The third hypothesis aimed to test the effect of providing empirical data about recidivism rates on participants' perceptions of recidivism risk. The results showed that indeed, perceptions of recidivism risk can be altered by presenting factual information, and that those who viewed sex offenders as particularly risky (e.g., women) may be particularly influenced by disseminating such information. However, the results also showed that despite providing participants with recidivism data, their perceived risk still remained relatively high (i.e., ~ 30% higher than empirical data would suggest the risk should be). These results seem to indicate that while there will not be exact acceptance of empirical data, the general public is receptive to this information and will somewhat adjust their negative perceptions. Furthermore, it seems that the presentation of empirical

information may counter the effect of demographic and historic factors in the respondents.

Of interest is that the mean recidivism rates across posttest groups were very similar in the range of 35-39%. The participants were presented with virtually the same posttest recidivism rates (i.e., 5-6%), however while the posttest means are very similar to each other they are significantly different from the presented information. This discrepancy may be explained by the presence of two subgroups of participants: those that account for empirical data and those that refute empirical data. About a third of participants (33%) had posttest recidivism ratings of 0-6%, while two-thirds of participants (67%) had posttest recidivism ratings above 6%. These similar posttest means indicate not only that individuals similarly perceive recidivism risk upon the presentation of empirical data, but also that despite randomization there are consistent subgroups of participants that accept or refute empirical data.

### *Limitations*

The results of this study should be viewed in the context of several limitations. First, while the study recruited participants from a national subject pool of those who commonly participate in psychological research, it is feasible that the anonymous nature of the study and the small monetary incentive may have resulted in some participants not putting forth their best effort. Second, due to technical difficulties, participants were presented with pretest offender vignettes in a fixed order: non-contact, contact-only, and mixed-contact. Participants' recidivism ratings were ranked in kind such that non-contact offenders were perceived as the least likely to recidivate and mixed-contact offenders

were perceived as the most likely to recidivate. While similar studies have also presented their stimuli in a fixed order (e.g., King & Roberts, 2015), it is nevertheless possible that such order effects may have confounded analyses that tested the first hypothesis. Additionally, it is possible that the effects of participant age and education on risk perception are not linear, and that treating these variables as categorical predictors would have resulted in more robust findings. Finally, this study measured perceived recidivism risk via a single-item scale. While the findings of this study are robust, as evidenced by the high initial risk perception and large changes in perceived risk across pretests and posttest assessments, the use of a single-item may have reduced the precision of the measure. Future studies that employ laboratory data gathering, with randomized stimulus presentation, and multiple items that assess perceived recidivism risk would do much to address these limitations and improve our understanding of offense type on public perception.

### *Future Directions*

As sex offenders reenter society, they face a daunting, if not deserved, amount of legal and social obstacles for their successful reintegration. These obstacles are influenced by current sex offender management policies that are aligned with public perceptions of how sex offenders should be treated. Therefore, it is going to take a great deal of public support to modify sex offender management policies in a way that there is equity between retribution, reparation, and rehabilitation. Findings from this study show some hope that the public views offenders differently based on the contact that they have with their victims, and that such views may be influenced through public education.

When the public was presented with specific recidivism data on these subtypes of offenders, there was a lower level of discrepancy between their perceptions of recidivism and empirically supported rates of recidivism. While there was still discrepancy, this may be an effective way to approach the public about modifying sex offender management policies.

At present, there is a distinct dearth of research on the topic of public perception of sex offenders. Filling this gap will be an important step to reducing risks for recidivism that are paradoxically generated by our current sex offender management policies. Future research should focus on exploring the public's perceptions of different subtypes of sex offenders in order to find other characteristics that the public is responsive to beside contact type. Future studies, may recruit larger samples in order to test the influence of demographic characteristics on perceptions of child sex offenders. Additionally, future research should focus on exploring the discrepancies between the public's perceptions of recidivism and risk in comparison to the empirical data on these matters. The results of this study suggest that the public is receptive to empirical data, but there still exists a great discrepancy between perceptions and empirical data.



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## APPENDICES



## Appendix I

### Vignettes

	<b>Vignette</b>
<b>Non-Contact</b>	<p>John is a 40-year-old male. He has never been married and has no children. He has some college education. He only drinks socially and has never used drugs. He has never been diagnosed with a mental illness, like Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder. He has never had mental health treatment or taken medicine for a mental illness. He has never been sexually abused. He was arrested for a sex offense, but he has never been arrested before. He was convicted and charged with downloading and looking at pictures and videos of naked children under the age of 13 years. He has never had sexual contact with a minor.</p> <p>John is a non-contact offender.</p>
<b>Contact-Only</b>	<p>John is a 40-year-old male. He has never been married and has no children. He has some college education. He only drinks socially and has never used drugs. He has never been diagnosed with a mental illness, like Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder. He has never had mental health treatment or taken medicine for a mental illness. He has never been sexually abused. He was arrested for a sex offense, but he has never been arrested before. He was convicted and charged with engaging in sexual activities with a child from his neighborhood. The child was under the age of 13 years.</p> <p>John is a contact-only offender.</p>
<b>Mixed-Contact</b>	<p>John is a 40-year-old male. He has never been married and has no children. He has some college education. He only drinks socially and has never used drugs. He has never been diagnosed with a mental illness, like Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder. He has never had mental health treatment or taken medicine for a mental illness. He has never been sexually abused. He was arrested for a sex offense, but he has never been arrested before. He was convicted and charged with engaging in sexual activities with a child and creating pictures and videos of child pornography. The child was under the age of 13 years.</p> <p>John is a mixed-contact offender.</p>

## Appendix II

### Vignette Follow Up Survey (Pretest)

Please respond to the following statement by indicating the extent to which you agree with it. To answer, please place the appropriate number next to the question, in the space provided.

On a Scale of 0-100% how likely is John to reoffend \_\_\_\_\_.

### Appendix III

#### Recidivism Rates for Vignette Characters

	<b>Vignette</b>
<b>Non-Contact</b>	<p>In some recent studies it was found that child sex offenders who commit offenses involving indirect, non-physical contact (non-contact offenders) reoffend at a rate of about 5%.</p> <p>Now please complete the following questions about John with this information in mind.</p>
<b>Contact-Only</b>	<p>In some recent studies it was found that child sex offenders who commit offenses involving any physical contact (contact-only offenders) reoffend at a rate of about 6%.</p> <p>Now please complete the following questions about John with this information in mind.</p>
<b>Mixed-Contact</b>	<p>In some recent studies it was found that child sex offenders who commit offenses involving both physical and indirect contact (mixed-contact offenders) reoffend at a rate of about 6%.</p> <p>Now please complete the following questions about John with this information in mind.</p>

## Appendix IV

### Vignette Follow Up Survey (Posttest)

Please respond to the following statement by indicating the extent to which you agree with it. To answer, please place the appropriate number next to the question, in the space provided.

On a Scale of 0-100% how likely is John to reoffend \_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix V

### Demographic Information Survey

- How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is your gender/sex?
  - Male
  - Female
- What is your race/ethnicity?
  - White or Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - Black or African American (Non-Hispanic)
  - Native American or American Indian
  - Asian / Pacific Islander
  - Multiracial / Not listed
- What is your highest attained education?
  - Some high school
  - High school graduate/GED
  - College graduate
  - Post-Graduate
- How would you describe your occupation?
  - Student
  - Education or health field
  - Professional (requiring advanced degree or trade certification)
  - Other
- Have you or someone you know ever experienced child sexual abuse?  
(inappropriate/forced advances, touching, or interaction between a child and adult)
  - Yes
  - No
- Do you know someone who has been convicted for a child sexual offense?
  - Yes
  - No
- How did you gain your knowledge of sex offenders? (click all that apply)
  - Media (TV/Radio/Newspaper)
  - School/Coursework
  - Internet (Research/Social Media)
  - Word of Mouth

## Appendix VI

### Attentional Measure

- For quality control purposes, click on strongly agree.
- In response to this question, click on strongly disagree.
- Please respond with somewhat disagree.